Educational Reform In China

An Intelligence Assessment

Secret

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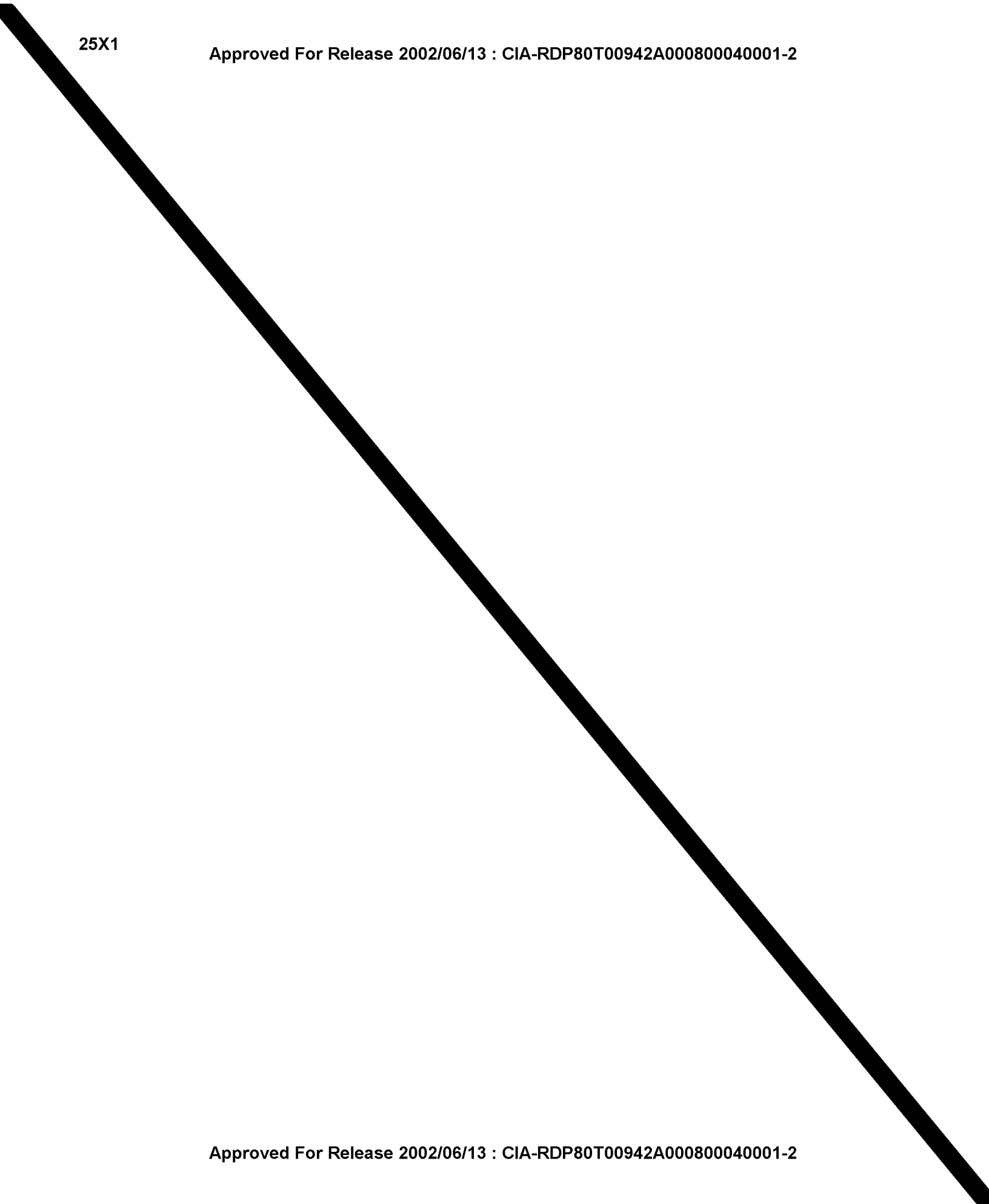

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National Foreign Assessment Center

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Educational Reform In China

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Introduction

Prospects for the longer-term success of Deng Xiaoping's (Teng Hsiao-p'ing) modernization program will depend heavily on Beijing's ability to reform and revitalize China's educational system. Education is both an integral part of Deng's program and a barometer of political change in China. It has always been closely linked to Chinese politics. Since the Communists came to power in 1949, educational policy has swung with the political line, moving from pragmatism to Maoist ideological purity. It emerged from the Cultural Revolution in a shambles—highly politicized, weak in academics, and almost completely unable to turn out the trained people the country needed. The current pragmatically oriented national leadership is trying to correct this situation and to create an educational system capable of serving and sustaining Deng's ambitious plans for modernization. To do so, however, it will have to overcome many intractable problems—political opposition, low morale, a shortage of funds, and poor planning and leadership in the field of education. Not the least of these problems is that education will almost certainly remain politically sensitive. Education will be one prime area in which significant popular backlash to Deng's modernization program could eventually emerge.

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This paper examines the Chinese leadership's educational policies and discusses the problems of educational reform and the prospects for ultimate success.

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A Legacy of Destruction—The Background of the Current Reforms

The Chinese educational system was almost destroyed by the Cultural Revolution and by radical reforms introduced after 1970. Because of the turmoil during the Cultural Revolution, all middle schools in China were closed for two years (1966-68), and all universities for four years (1966-70). When these schools finally reopened, a number of radical reforms were implemented. Grades and examinations (including both regular term exams and university entrance exams) were abolished. Courses of study were shortened at all levels—from 10 to eight years in primary and middle schools, from five to four years in university science programs, and from four to three years in all other university programs. Textbooks used before the Cultural Revolution were declared obsolete and discarded. Curriculums were revised to stress political themes and practical applications of knowledge. Courses in basic theory, considered irrelevant by the leftists, were either abolished or neglected, and students were forced to spend a large part of their time working in communes and factories rather than studying. Graduate programs in all fields were abolished, and postgraduate students were trained only informally in research institutes, if at all. Under this very limited arrangement, few students could be trained, since many research institutes themselves were abolished or turned into production units in factories. The China University of Science and Technology, for instance, the leading center of science education in China, was moved from Beijing to Anhui (Anhwei) Province, where students undertook work-study programs but were deprived of the advantages of interning in Beijing's Academy of Sciences.

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Entrance requirements for universities were also drastically altered. After 1970, students were selected largely on the basis of their class backgrounds and political reliability rather than their intellectual ability or academic records. In addition, almost all students were required to spend at least two years working in the countryside after completing middle school before they could apply to college. As a result, most students required remedial work once they finally enrolled in colleges and universities, both to make up for the deficiencies in their education and to refresh their knowledge of what they had learned before going to work in the countryside.

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As education programs declined, so did teaching standards. Many teachers were persecuted for being

overly intellectual, and, as a result, either were purged, left their jobs, or neglected their duties. Teaching became so risky and unpopular that many rural schools were forced to recruit teachers who had only a junior high school education. Because of the decline in educational and teaching standards, even university graduates were often poorly trained and ignorant of basic knowledge in their fields. 25X1

In addition to these problems, discipline at all levels was severely eroded. Students were encouraged to rebel against their teachers and to ignore their orders and instructions. Teachers, in turn, cowed by leftist attacks, were reluctant to take firm measures against students, or to try to maintain order in classrooms. 25X1

The effects of these leftist reforms and policies on the Chinese educational system were disastrous. Graduates of Chinese schools and universities were unable to think and work on their own and were unable to conduct independent research in their fields. As a result, China turned out few competent scientists or other specialists needed to help modernize her economy. According to Zhou Peiyuan (Chou P'ei-yuan), president of Beijing University, China today has only 300,000 to 400,000 scientists. In contrast, Japan, with only about one-ninth of China's population, has more than 500,000. 25X1

The dangers of this situation were recognized by several Chinese leaders, and in the early 1970s they made efforts to correct it. In 1972, for instance, Premier Zhou En-lai (Chou En-lai) issued orders to universities to introduce courses in basic theory in the natural sciences and to strengthen and expand research work. He also proposed that some graduating senior middle school students be allowed to enroll directly in universities without first working in the countryside. In 1973, the State Council decided to reinstitute university entrance exams. In 1975, under orders from Deng, then vice-premier, the State Council drew up an "Outline Report on the Chinese Academy of Sciences," designed to remedy the damage done to scientific research programs. All of these measures, however, were sabotaged by the leftists. It was only after the fall of the Gang of Four in October 1976 that the government was able to take effective measures to reform the educational system. 25X1

The New Educational Reforms

Shortly after the purge of the Gang of Four, the Chinese Government began to take measures to reform and upgrade the Chinese educational system—a task it realized was essential to the success of China's modernization program. As a result of these measures, the leftist educational changes undertaken both during and after the Cultural Revolution have been almost completely overturned, and attempts are under way to restore the pre-Cultural Revolution system. 25X1

One of the first and most important reforms was an overhaul of the entrance requirements for universities and colleges. In October 1977 it was announced that university entrance examinations would be reinstituted and that high test scores would be the most important qualification for admission to college. The first round of exams was held in December 1977 and the second in July 1978. For the first round, each province drew up its own exam; subsequently, a nationwide standardized test was introduced. Although political and work records are still taken into account in college admissions, they can no longer offset poor performance on the exam or a poor academic record. 25X1

A related reform, also announced in October 1977, was the decision to allow 20 to 30 percent of each freshman class of university students to enter college directly from senior middle school, without first working in the countryside. These students must all have outstanding academic records. Their percentage is expected to increase gradually. 25X1

The national work conference on enrollment, which met in October 1977, announced that graduate programs, which were almost completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, would be restored. As a result of this announcement, the China University of Science and Technology, based in Anhui since the Cultural Revolution, was ordered to establish a graduate school in Beijing and to enroll 1,000 graduate students within two to three years. Its program is to last three years and will permit students to work and do research at the various institutes under the Academy of Sciences. As in the case of undergraduate programs, academic excellence is the main qualification for acceptance, although work and political records remain important.

Other schools have set up similar programs. Beijing University, for instance, plans to enroll about 1,000 graduate students. Postgraduate studies are also being revived. According to a recent report there were 10,500 postgraduate students in 1978. [redacted] 25X1

At all levels of the educational system, study and academic ability now are being stressed over political reliability, work records, and work experience. This new emphasis has been reflected in a number of reforms:

- Students and teachers are required to spend less time working in the countryside and in factories during the school year, and more time teaching and studying. The goal is for each person to spend at least five-sixths of available time on professional or academic work.

- Grading and routine examinations and tests have been restored. Students are no longer automatically promoted from grade to grade regardless of their academic performance.

- Courses of study have been lengthened in universities, from three years to four years in liberal arts programs and from four years to five years in science programs. There appears to be no plan, however, to lengthen primary or secondary education from the current 10 years or return to the pre-Cultural Revolution 12-year system.

- New textbooks are being compiled for all levels of the educational system. The first batch, issued in September 1978, was based in part on a study of foreign textbooks collected by Chinese education delegations to Western Europe, the United States, and Japan. According to a recent report, China has collected more than 71,000 foreign science and engineering textbooks since 1977.

- The curriculum in universities is being revamped to reflect the greater stress on academics. In the social sciences and humanities, topics banned since the Cultural Revolution—Western literature, Chinese classical literature, religion—are once more being taught. In the sciences, greater stress is being placed on courses in basic theory and on theoretical science. [redacted]

To relieve the shortage of qualified teachers, teacher training courses have been started in various areas. In addition, academic titles have been restored, teachers purged during the Cultural Revolution have been gradually rehabilitated and reassigned to teaching jobs, many teachers have been given modest raises, and the authority of teachers over their students has been increased significantly. Discipline in classrooms, almost unknown since the Cultural Revolution, has been at least partly restored. In spite of these efforts, however, there are still too few teachers, and many young people, depressed by their bleak job prospects, are still restless. [redacted] 25X1

In addition, there have been important changes in the structure of universities and in educational administration. Revolutionary committees formed to govern schools after the Cultural Revolution have been abolished, and in many universities the pre-Cultural Revolution administrative system, including the positions of rector, dean, and president, has been restored. This change is intended to strengthen the control of teachers and academic personnel over the university system and reduce political interference in the academic side of university life. [redacted] 25X1

Many of the recent reforms aim to raise the quality of the Chinese educational system. One of the most important of these is the restoration of the "key university" system originally developed in the 1950s. Under this system, a number of model schools are to be developed throughout the country. These schools will train the best students, get the best teachers, undertake major research projects, and, in general, set the standards for first-rate academic work for other schools to follow. There are currently 88 such schools, including such institutions as Beijing, Qing Hua (Tsinghua), and Fudan (Futan) Universities, and the China University of Science and Technology in Anhui. Key schools are also to be set up at the primary and secondary levels. [redacted] 25X1

In addition to improving quality, the new reforms also aim at increasing the number of students educated. Leading Chinese educational officials have noted that the 900,000 students now enrolled in universities are far too few for China's needs, and have indicated they hope to increase this number to 3 million by 1985. At 25X1

present, however, China lacks the schools and qualified faculty to accommodate more students. To overcome these problems, the Central Committee has ordered that the military and other organizations return the school buildings they occupied during the Cultural Revolution. According to the estimates of the Ministry of Education, this would create space for 150,000 extra university students, 370,000 middle school vocational students, 900,000 middle school students, and 810,000 primary school students—not much in a country with almost a billion people, but still significant when educational facilities are so limited.

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Other measures to increase the number of students include the introduction of teaching by television and the development of a large number of radio and television courses to be broadcast for the general public. A central radio-television university was set up in February 1979, and began to broadcast courses throughout the country. Provincial and local radio-television universities have also been established to relay the courses of the central university. These measures, of course, help to minimize the shortage of qualified teachers by reaching a large number of people with a small teaching staff.

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Even if these reforms can be successfully implemented, it will be many years before Chinese schools can begin to turn out the highly trained graduates the country's modernization program requires. Because China needs qualified scientists and technicians immediately, however, the Chinese Government has drawn up plans to send large numbers of its best students abroad to study. According to various reports, between 10,000 and 40,000 students will go to Japan, the United States, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand over the next few years. Most of them will study science and technology, although a few will take courses in business management and the social sciences. Although plans call for sending both undergraduate and postgraduate students, most of those sent so far have been researchers or scholars in their thirties and forties who graduated from college before the Cultural Revolution. At present they are the only Chinese "students" with the academic credentials to take Western university courses.

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The objective of the exchange program is to help train the scientists, engineers, technicians, and management personnel needed for China's modernization program. For the most part, students will do research, teach, or take staff management positions in industry on their return to China. The Chinese Government is so convinced of the value of sending these people abroad that it apparently is willing to risk some student defections.

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Like other reforms, the plan to send students abroad to study will almost certainly meet political opposition—in this case from those raised on the Maoist belief that China should rely on her own, not foreign, resources. In addition, there will be problems recruiting qualified students. Because of the disarray in Chinese education in recent years, few college- or graduate-level students have received the equivalent of Western secondary education. Most, therefore, will be unable to take Western college-level courses. Moreover, very few have had any training in foreign languages—prerequisite for study abroad. There will also be financial problems. Most Chinese education leaders are unaware of the costs of educating students in Western countries, and in fact have been horrified when told of these costs during negotiations over the exchange program. All officials have tight budgets and a limited amount of foreign exchange with which to finance a large number of projects. As a result, unless host countries are prepared to foot all or part of the bills for Chinese exchange students, the Chinese Government may be unable to pay for its share of the program. Finally, Chinese students sent abroad will face enormous problems adjusting to societies and educational systems radically different from their own.

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In addition to sending students abroad, the Chinese Government plans to invite large numbers of foreign specialists to China to teach and do research. Many of these are to be overseas Chinese, who understand Chinese culture and society better than foreigners and who often speak Chinese. There are also plans to invite other foreigners as well, however.

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China plans to ask Germany to establish a German university in Shanghai, to be staffed by 100 German teachers. Other countries will be asked to send language teachers to China to help prepare Chinese students for study abroad.

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Of all the efforts recently made to deal with the current crisis in Chinese education, the exchange program tells the most about the extent of the problems facing Chinese education. Even after two years of efforts to reform Chinese education, the school and university system is still in such disarray that the best students have to be sent abroad to obtain an adequate education.

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Problems Facing Educational Reform

Although there is wide support for these reform measures, the Chinese Government faces an uphill battle in trying to implement them. There are many reasons for this—political, geographical, cultural, and economic.

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The most immediate problem is the continued opposition to reform from supporters of leftist policies. This resistance has been discussed at length in the Chinese press. Many schools continue to stress politics and political courses rather than academics; others still oblige their students and teachers to spend more time working in factories and on communes than they do teaching and studying. In one instance, the director of the Anhui provincial education and cultural office had to be reprimanded three times for his hostility to new education policies.

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Although some national leaders may have reservations about the new policies—for instance, Wu De (Wu Te) recently purged as head of the city government of Beijing, has been accused in wall posters of obstructing educational reform there—most of the opposition comes from middle- and lower-level functionaries who rose during the Cultural Revolution. There is also opposition in universities from students recruited under the old leftist standards who stand to lose out under the new system, and from people who graduated from school while leftist policies were in effect and who profited from the leftist measures. At Beijing University, China's most prestigious school, this hostility is so great that wall poster wars broke out between old students and recently recruited ones in March 1978. This opposition will probably continue for some time to come and will slow the implementation of new policies.

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Related to leftist opposition are low morale and apathy among large numbers of intellectuals, students, and educators. Many of these people were purged during the Cultural Revolution for supporting policies similar to those being implemented now. Because of their experiences, they are reluctant to support the new reforms openly or vigorously for fear that the party line will change and they will once again be persecuted for their views. The government has gone to considerable lengths to try to reassure these people, but with only limited success.

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Student morale is low for another reason. Because there are few places in colleges and universities and few jobs in the cities, most young people are sent to the countryside to work after high school. Their jobs there are often menial or unprestigious, their living conditions tough and spartan, and their prospects for advancing or returning to the cities bleak. Since the fall of the leftists, who were the main supporters of this down-to-the-countryside program, the government has tried to improve the lot of young people in the countryside in various ways. It has made efforts to improve their living conditions and increase their wages. It has also tried to provide them with various means of furthering their education in the countryside, including television and radio courses, spare-time schools, and various work-study programs. More important, the National Conference on Educated Youth Settling in the Countryside, held between 31 October and 10 December 1978, promised that as China modernizes and as more jobs become available in the cities, young people will no longer be sent to the countryside. It also apparently approved significant changes in the down-to-the-countryside program in some areas. In Sichuan (Szechaun) Province in southwest China, for instance, middle school graduates in nonfarming households in three prefectures and in all county capitals, small factories, and townships have been excused from going to the countryside. These changes, however, are likely to be counterproductive in the short run, increasing rather than decreasing student awareness of their problems. In December 1978 and January 1979, as many of these changes were announced, student demonstrations broke out in Beijing, Shanghai, Shaanxi (Shensi) Province, and Yunnan Province to protest the down-to-the countryside program. Until the program ends completely, and

until there are better educational and job opportunities, many young people are likely to remain restless and dissatisfied, yearning for the educations and jobs they cannot have. 25X1

In addition to these two problems, the Chinese Government will have to cope with a host of difficulties stemming from the radical education policies pursued after the Cultural Revolution: the shortage of qualified teachers, poor discipline in schools, the lack of adequate textbooks and equipment, the poor backgrounds and training of most college-age students, the weakness of primary and secondary school education, and the need to revamp the curriculum at all levels. Each of these alone will take time and effort to solve. The real difficulty, however, is that so many intractable problems have to be dealt with at once. 25X1

Compounding these difficulties are a series of economic problems. China is a poor and underdeveloped country, with little money and few resources to support its ambitious modernization program. There will undoubtedly be hot competition for the little that is available among the various sectors of the Chinese economy—agriculture, industry, the military, the science and technology establishment—and among the various programs and projects that are part of the modernization effort. Education and educational reform will probably have to take a back seat to the more immediate problems of modernizing agriculture and industry. They will therefore probably receive fewer resources than will be needed to solve their problems adequately. 25X1

Poor planning and leadership are also likely to be problems. Few if any of the current leaders seem to have a comprehensive view of the needs of Chinese education or how educational reform fits into China's modernization program. They seem to deal with problems on an ad hoc basis, as they arise, with little thought of the consequences. A typical example is the program to send Chinese students abroad to study. Education officials involved in the program seem to have no clear idea of the number of students to be sent or the problems these students will face in foreign schools because of their weak backgrounds in their fields of study and in foreign languages. 25X1

In addition, the Ministry of Education and other organs involved in making educational policy are understaffed and lack personnel with the experience or expertise to implement the new policies effectively. Only a few top-level education officials have had wide experience in educational or science and technology policymaking and in dealing with Western countries. These leaders—such as Fang Yi and Zhou Peiyuan—have many responsibilities and are unable to devote much time to any one of them. Zhou, for instance, is both head of the China Science and Technological Association and president of Beijing University, and also has many responsibilities in the science and technology field. At least one key education official, Vice-Minister of Education Li Qi (Li Chi), is in frail health. Junior education officials are reportedly unsophisticated and unknowledgeable. Moreover, many of them, accustomed for years to implementing radical Cultural Revolution policies, are reportedly uncomfortable implementing the new academically oriented policies. 25X1

The greatest problems facing Chinese education, however, may be demographic and cultural, not political. Given China's huge population—now estimated at almost 1 billion people—it would be an enormous and all-but-impossible task to give an adequate, let alone good or thorough, university education to all college-age young people in the country. Most young people in China want to go to college because this will ensure them a better job. It would be equally difficult, at the current stage of China's development, to find appropriate jobs for such a large number of educated people. There are relatively few jobs in the small, modern, urban sector of the economy, and jobs in rural areas—the majority of those available—demand a relatively low level of formal education. Presumably, as the pace of modernization quickens, more jobs will be available. 25X1

A second major problem is the large amount of linguistic and even cultural diversity within the population. In parts of southern China, different dialects are spoken even in neighboring villages. Efforts to make Mandarin the standard spoken language have proceeded slowly. In addition, in many areas—such as Xizang (Tibet), Xinjiang (Sinkiang), Yunnan, and Guizhou (Kweichow)—there are significant minority populations whose educational levels are well below

those of the Chinese population. Educational and cultural levels are also much higher in cities and urban areas than in the countryside. As a result, it is difficult to establish uniform levels of education, uniform standards, and equal educational opportunities throughout the country. A measure of the seriousness of the problem was provided by the results of the 1978 university entrance examinations. The minimum passing scores varied sharply from province to province. The low was 250 in Xizang, the high, 365 in Fujian (Fukien).

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In many ways, educational reform in China is caught, at least for the short run, in a vicious circle. Any measure taken will almost inevitably undercut another one. If the best students and researchers are sent abroad, for instance, they will not be immediately available to teach in China, and teaching standards will remain low. If money is spent sending students abroad, there will be less money to implement the much-needed changes at home, and educational reform will proceed even more slowly. If money is spent on "key" schools, other schools, particularly rural ones, will have to be neglected.

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In addition, educational reform, like other new policies, will have to produce results in a relatively short period of time. In the long run, time may be on the side of the opponents of reform. The most committed supporters of the new policies are Deng Xiaoping and his followers, many of whom were educated abroad or have had wide contacts with foreign culture and society. This Western-educated elite, however, is aging—most are in their sixties or seventies, and some are even older. Opponents of the new policies, on the other hand, are probably somewhat younger. Supporters of reform will have to root out leftist opposition, overcome apathy and fear of taking action, and win over both young people educated in schools dominated by leftist ideas and midlevel bureaucrats with little exposure to Western culture, all in the relatively short time remaining before they pass from the scene. There have been signs recently that the leadership is trying to build support for the new policies among provincial officials and young people by including large numbers of provincial party secretaries in delegations going abroad, and by relaxing the down-to-the-countryside program. If educational reform is to succeed, however, the leadership will have to make far greater efforts to win over its opponents and, more importantly, the new policies will have to produce striking results in an almost impossibly short period of time.

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Prospects

Even if the Chinese Government achieves its educational goals, there is some question whether the stress on quality, elitism, and academic achievement will solve the problems of Chinese education or meet China's needs.

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At the current stage of her development, China's needs are more those of a developing country than a developed one. Its economy consists of a large, relatively backward agricultural sector, and a small but expanding modern urban one. Most jobs are in the agricultural sector, and require a relatively low level of education or technical training

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What China needs, in the short run, is a small number of highly trained specialists to lead its modernization effort, and a much larger number of people with a lower, less sophisticated level of education to serve in the agricultural sector and help spread knowledge of modern technology there. As the country modernizes, of course, the need for highly trained specialists will gradually increase, and so must the number of such people that schools turn out.

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The current reform program aims at turning out specialists rather than low-level technicians. True, there are television and radio courses, part-time education programs, and work-study programs, all of which are designed to serve the needs of the rural population. But these seem to be used mainly as a means of allaying the frustration of students who fail to get into regular colleges and universities, and not as important training centers in their own right. For the most part, these programs are expected to be self-supporting, and get little or no financial aid from the central government. Most available money appears to go to the more prestigious universities and colleges.

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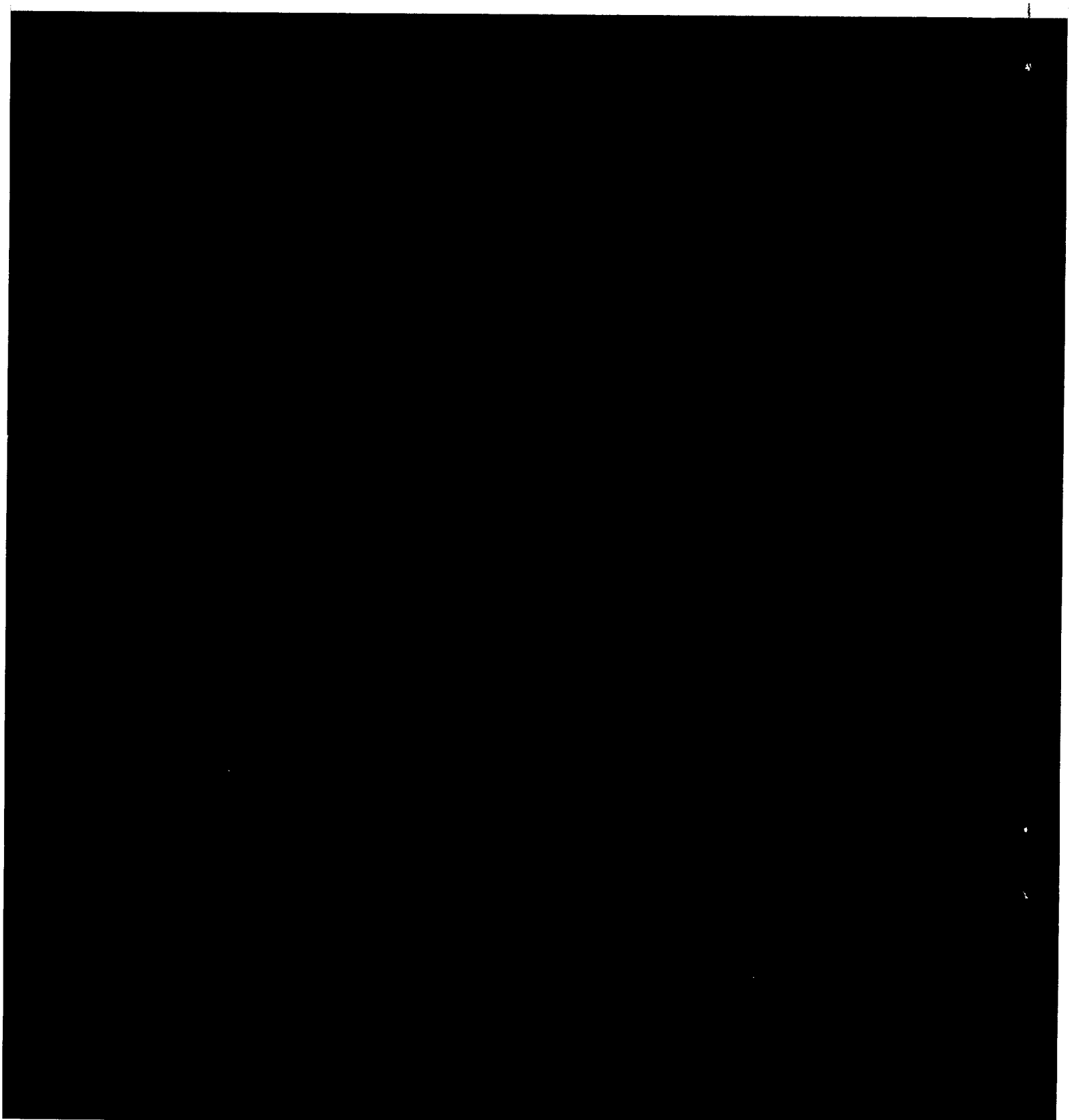
A related problem is that as a result of the stress on higher education, the Chinese school system will turn out more highly trained and educated people than the

economy, at its current stage of development, can absorb. The result would be a class of overqualified, alienated intellectuals for whom no appropriate jobs are available. 25X1

The new reforms could work against China's needs and best interests in other ways as well. Too much stress on quality and elite education could increase both the social inequalities and the differences between rural and urban areas which the government would like to eliminate. Under the "key school" system, the best schools and universities will be located, as they have been in the past, in urban areas, especially in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Students who live in these areas will naturally have better opportunities to advance themselves than those from poorer rural areas. Moreover, as the amount of time students spend working in the countryside is reduced, the links of city dwellers and students to the countryside will become even weaker. Although the government plans to continue the down-to-the-countryside program for the time being, this will only increase the frustration of those young people obliged to work in rural areas. 25X1

This raises yet another potential problem—that by stressing the importance of obtaining higher education, the Chinese Government will raise the expectations of Chinese youth unrealistically. Even under the best of circumstances, the number of young people in China interested in education far exceeds the few places available in Chinese universities, especially the better universities. The majority of Chinese youth, therefore, will continue to have to work either in the countryside or in less glamorous jobs in the cities. Yet the current educational program fails to prepare most students for this prospect. Unless this is changed, frustration and dissatisfaction among young people are likely to increase. 25X1

In spite of the disrepute in which they are held in China today, the leftists in many ways correctly diagnosed a number of China's problems—the danger of increasing social inequalities, the problems of creating an overeducated, overqualified elite, and the need for people whose talents and training are suited to China's agricultural economy. The problem the current government must solve is how to upgrade Chinese education without increasing frustrations and social tensions in the country. 25X1



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Educational Reform In China

Key Points

China is seeking to come to grips with the effects of the Cultural Revolution that left Chinese education in a shambles—politicized, weak in academics, and incapable of producing highly qualified graduates, who will be required for modernization. During the Cultural Revolution:

- Middle schools were closed for two years (1966-68), and universities for four (1966-70), and reopened with shorter programs, no examinations or grades, and highly politicized curriculums.
- Qualified teachers were purged and discipline severely eroded.

Since October 1976, the government has been able to undertake effective reform measures aimed at restoring the pre-Cultural Revolution system:

- Courses of study are being lengthened, curriculums revised to stress academics, and enrollments will be increased.
- More students will gradually be accepted into universities directly after middle school without being sent to work in the countryside.
- Until reforms enable China's own schools to produce needed specialists, foreign study will be permitted, and foreign scholars are being asked to lecture in China.

The aging leaders still face numerous and often intractable problems in educational reform:

- Younger officials, who are products of Cultural Revolution education, oppose many of the reforms, and are playing for time.
- Resources are insufficient, and education will probably have to stand in line behind the expensive modernization programs.
- In the long run, reforms could produce more highly qualified graduates than the modernization program can absorb, creating frustration among overqualified graduates who, at best, must settle for rural or more prosaic employment.

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